

Majority Rule

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*(Prefatory Note, March 2007: I wrote this paper before I stumbled across the extensive literature on so-called consensus decision making a year or so later. Until then my understanding of the method had been based on my experience of it in the movement, and I didn't view it favorably. Now that I understand it better, and have seen the real thing in practice, I like it better, although with serious qualifications. I hope one day to write an essay on **Deciding**, which will be a comparison between majority rule and "consensus," among other things. The following essay, by the way, is not a defense of majority rule, just some reflections about it. – Addendum, March 2017: In the past fifteen years I've done quite a bit of work on decision making, as reflected in a number of my papers. There is still much to do, especially to make consensus decision making a more usable procedure, as it is clearly a better practice, in many/most cases, than simple majority rule. The following essay is still useful I think, even though it was pre-consensus for me, because it elucidates aspects of the problem not considered elsewhere. Nevertheless, some of the points made herein have been superseded in my later essays.)*

Majority rule is just a voting procedure for resolving disagreements within a deliberative assembly. Sometimes it might be combined with other rules, like those requiring unanimous or two-thirds votes on certain issues. But what voting procedures were used to select the voting procedures? That is, what rule was used for the vote to select majority rule? - majority rule, unanimity, two-thirds, or what? And how was that decision made? We are clearly in an infinite regress here.

In reality, the establishment, for any assembly, of the original procedures for voting usually happens by fiat or by revolution (given the rarity of unanimity). Thus democracy can usually only be established in-between regimes. In the case of the US constitution for example, the fifty-five members of the constitutional convention decided that the constitution would be considered adopted if nine out of the thirteen colonies approved it, with the constitution simply being imposed by force on the remaining four colonies. (As it happened, only two colonies refused ratification at the time, North Carolina and Rhode Island, both of which had ratified by 1789, and 1790 respectively.) In the case of international treaties, the writers of the treaty usually include rules for adoption in the treaty itself, stipulating how many countries need to ratify the treaty before it comes into force. This works of course only if the treaty contains enforcement powers, so that the terms of the treaty can be imposed by force on nations who don't ratify it. In the absence of enforcement powers, a nation can simply ignore the treaty.

National parliaments do have enforcement powers of course. A nation-state is by definition a monopolizer of violence, so-called legitimate violence (that is, the parliament defines its own violence as legitimate and everyone else's as illegitimate). National governments have armed forces, intelligence agencies, police, and secret police at their disposal to enforce the will of the parliamentary majority on the minority in the parliament and on everyone else in the nation. Any other police or armed forces within the nation are declared illegal. In the setting of the nation-state system, minorities who refuse to go along with majority decisions have only one recourse (other than simply disobeying and facing fines and prison) - civil war. They can attempt to secede from the nation (from the decision-making unit), and establish a nation of their own, with its own parliament (a separate decision making unit).

The situation is somewhat different for sub-national organizations like corporations and voluntary associations. Unless the decisions of these groups can be linked to national laws, and thus be enforced by the national government (and many decisions of capitalist corporations are), they cannot be imposed by force, since the organizations have no policemen to arrest and imprison those who disobey. About all they can do is expel the disobedient from the organization, revoking their membership. Members of an organization who come to disagree too severely with the policies of that organization (however established, either through majority rule or management), simply leave the organization, as a rule. A minority can also attempt to expel the majority of course, and this happens all the time (as in a takeover). Associations are rather often taken over by minorities within them which contrive in one way or another to force the majority out of the project. There are also the numerous cases of splits within an association, wherein a minority leaves in mass and establishes another organization. The history of political parties, especially on the left, is replete with such splits.

The principle of majority rule can itself sometimes lead to a split. Let's say that a small group of people get together and establish an association in order to accomplish certain goals. They are all agreed upon these goals (tasks, objectives), and they also agree to govern their association by direct democracy, using majority rule to resolve disagreements. The founders therefore are very clear about what they want to do. But new members of course are needed, in order for the project to grow and accomplish its objectives. So new members are recruited, all of whom have to agree to the original objectives and established voting procedures as a condition of being admitted as members. Nevertheless, the recruitment and admission process is rather different than the deep commitment to certain goals that brought the original founders together, and over time, a majority can slowly emerge in the project which wants to take the project in a different direction than the one originally intended by the founders. Founders can thus find themselves in a situation, through the principle of majority rule, of losing their project, and all the years of effort that went into building it. They are faced with the dilemma of either leaving this project (the one they originally founded) and starting all over again in a new one, or of leaving and abandoning their goals altogether, or of staying in and working toward goals that they didn't originally endorse.

It is because of the possibility of this happening that founders of projects sometimes eject majority rule and choose instead some kind of elite rule, whereby the original founders of a project can keep control of it. This is actually the predominant organizational form in our society, in corporations and in all hierarchically organized associations. These organizations recruit people to work on the project, wage-earners for corporations and members for voluntary associations (because almost all human projects require more than one or a few persons in order to be accom-

plished), but control of the organization remains in the hands of a few. In the case of corporations, majority rule (workers control or democracy at the workplace) is obviously anathema to capitalists because it would destroy their objective of making profit. Even if the worker-controlled enterprise stayed in the market and continued to make profit (rather than switch to cooperative labor and leave the market), the profit would not go to the original owners, but would be appropriated by all the employees. This is why capitalists fight the movement for workplace democracy tooth and nail. It's a life and death struggle for them.

In non-capitalist organizations, elite control may enable the founders to keep the organization on course for quite some time, but ultimately, it is no guarantee. Why? Because disagreements can emerge among the original founders, as new situations and new issues arise, over what direction the organization should take in light of these new circumstances. So the belief that elite control of an association is a solution to the problem of splits is ultimately an illusion. Before long, we always end up right back at majority/minority dynamics regarding the goals and procedures of the project.

The same process will be at work in our neighborhood assemblies. Assume for example that at the very first meeting of a neighborhood assembly a proposal is made for a certain set of voting procedures, and that this proposal wins unanimous support. Every member of the assembly agrees to resolve disagreements in this certain way and to abide by decisions made like that. What happens then if a new member moves into the neighborhood or a child reaches maturity and starts participating in the deliberations of the assembly? Are the voting procedures going to be voted on anew every time a new member comes into the assembly? Surely not. New members will have to accept the procedures that already exist. The assembly may decide to change them periodically, but that is a different matter. Thus the unanimity has disappeared because new members did not explicitly agree to abide by the procedures (although I suppose acceptance of the procedures could be made a condition for membership). But what if the procedures were voted on anew with the addition of every new member? Wouldn't the unanimity eventually break down anyway? Surely so. It's easy to see then that even if an assembly starts out unanimous, as regards voting procedures, it is unlikely to remain that way, because sooner or later a person will come along who will disagree (or some original member will change their mind), and thus break the unanimity. Original unanimity is therefore no solution to the problem of splits and disagreement. There is no escaping disagreement, and the minority/majority dynamics these disagreements create.

As an aside: What if a majority emerges in an assembly that doesn't like democracy any longer, doesn't think direct democracy works very well, doesn't like majority rule? Instead, this majority wants to elect leaders and turn over decision making to them (or even worse, wants to simply accept leaders without even electing them). Can a majority in such an assembly use majority rule to abolish majority rule? Obviously not. This would be totally contradictory, and would represent in fact a coup, a counter-revolution, if they were able to get away with it. A majority which favors tyranny cannot use majority rule to justify its preference. But what if a majority in an assembly did so vote? What then? The minority that wants to keep democracy would have to revolt, reject the majority decision, and struggle to defeat the anti-democratic majority.

This shows us that even if there is unanimity to begin with about accepting majority rule as a way to resolve disagreements, this unanimity can break down. Actually, it can break down around almost any intensely felt opposition to a majority decision, and not just when the majority decides to abolish majority rule. This example shows us also that democracy, if we ever get it, will

involve us in an unending struggle to keep it, although that struggle may lessen in intensity as we gain decades and hopefully centuries of experience with it, and democratic values permeate deeper and deeper into our cultures and personalities.

Let's throw another ingredient into the mix. Let's assume that our neighborhood assembly does not have police at its disposal, so that the majority cannot impose its will on the minority by force.

A digression: We might want to remind ourselves that the earth was covered for tens of thousands of years with hunting and gathering tribes of human beings, and they had no police forces. Also, for the past several thousand years, the vast majority of humans have lived in peasant villages, and societies comprised mostly of peasant villages, and there were no police forces there either. The empires that were sometimes superimposed on these peasant societies had police, tax collectors, and soldiers whose reach extended, usually quite superficially, down into peasant villages, but the villages themselves were free of police, and they managed just fine.

The situation started to change rather drastically with the emergence of capitalism in Europe nearly five hundred years ago. Capitalists required governments which could monopolize violence through armed force, in order to defend and enforce capitalist imperatives. So police power, and violence, extended deeper and deeper into the society. Peasant villages were slowly destroyed in Europe over the past several centuries. They were nevertheless still quite prominent even as late as the second world war, and it has only been since then that this destruction has been carried, on a large scale, to the rest of the world, with peasant societies disappearing almost everywhere. The last half century has seen the final rout of the peasant world in most of Europe, with the process well along elsewhere.

The European settler governments that formed the United States are a somewhat different case, in that they rapidly destroyed whatever hunting-gathering tribes and peasant villages that were already here, while the settler society itself never had autonomous peasant villages. This society has been capitalist from day one. US citizens then have been living so long in a social order founded on violence that it's hard for them to believe that there could ever be life without it. They have never known anything else, and have no memories of a peasant society before capitalism.

I sketched the above history just to remind us that police forces are not an inherent, inevitable, universal feature of human life. We lived without them once, and we can do so again. But just try to convince someone living in the United States, for example, that we could arrange our social life in such a way that we wouldn't need police, and see how far you get.

To return now to the issue I had raised right before this digression: if neighborhoods do not have police forces to impose the will of the majority on the minority, what bearing does this have on the relations between the majority and the minority within our assemblies?

In the absence of an armed police force to impose majority decisions through arrest, fines, and imprisonment, we will certainly want to be careful though to avoid the following peculiar situation: It could come to be thought that members of an assembly who disagree with a decision of the assembly don't have to abide by it. In other words, the decision of the majority is not thought to be binding on the minority. Wouldn't this embody perfectly the principle of 'self-assumed political obligation'? - each individual will only obey those decisions which they have personally agreed to.

But then why have an assembly at all? Why go through all the trouble and expense of building meeting halls, gathering together, debating the issues, and voting, if the people who vote against

a proposal can ignore it? At the core of 'self-assumed political obligation' therefore must lie a commitment to procedures for resolving disagreements. Without this commitment to these procedures, and the commitment to abide by decisions that are made following these procedures, democracy is impossible. All you have is a hall full of fanatic individualists who waste their time discussing and voting, only to do just what they each wanted to do anyway. There are plenty of such fanatic individualists already around, persons who would never commit in advance to a procedure for reaching cooperative policies, believing as they do in the absolute sovereignty of the individual, wherein they do only what they want when they want. Such persons are as great a threat to democracy, perhaps even a greater threat given contemporary culture, than tyrants.

We have already seen however that a commitment to abide by a procedure for resolving disagreements, say majority rule, can breakdown too, in extreme cases. Certainly, if a majority decides to murder a circle of members of the assembly, those targeted for execution are not going to stick by their previous commitment to majority rule. It will break down too if a majority decides to abolish democracy in favor of tyranny. In fact, it can break down on almost any extreme rejection of a majority decision by the minority.

In deliberative assemblies therefore, which are based on free association and voluntary compliance rather than compulsion and violence, what it really boils down to is that on every issue the minority must decide whether or not to go along with the majority, even though they may disagree. On routine matters, the decision to go along might be assumed to be routine too. But in cases of severe disagreement, whether or not to abide immediately comes to the fore.

There is another peculiar situation that we must avoid (which is really the same situation, but from another angle): It could come to be thought that the assembly must reach 'consensus' on every issue. The only practical meaning of consensus (although this is rarely admitted by its proponents) is unanimity. The belief that every last person in an assembly must agree to a proposal before the assembly can act is surely one of the most destructive and misguided beliefs to have emerged in the opposition movements in the past few decades. What this belief often ends up doing is holding the entire assembly hostage to a minority of one, or a minority of a few. It also results in extreme pressure being brought to bear on dissidents. The debate starts to become dishonest and compulsive.

Not every person has to agree with every decision. All that is needed is for every person to agree to go along with the decision, even though they disagree with it. This is a much different thing, and retains an open and honest expression of disagreement. Whereas rule by consensus, so-called, tends to suppress such disagreements.

What is needed in our deliberative assemblies is a measure of the intensity of opposition to any given proposal. To my knowledge, this has almost never existed so far. Intensity varies in both degree and number. There could be a majority of fifty-one intensely in favor, and a minority of forty-nine mildly opposed. There could be a majority of ninety mildly in favor and a minority of ten intensely opposed. And so forth. It is this mix that is crucial in majority-minority dynamics in deliberative assemblies.

We need a two-stage voting system. The first vote measures approval or disapproval of the proposal. The second vote measures the intensity of opposition – disagree but willing to go along, disagree and willing to go along with minor changes, intensely disagree and not willing to go along, and so forth. This would give the assembly the knowledge it needs to proceed. If it finds that there exists a small minority that intensely disagrees and refuses to go along, then it knows that it has to back up and rethink the proposition. It knows that it has to struggle to compromise, and

work through the issue until a proposal can be devised that everyone can agree to go along with, even though some may still disagree with it. This would also bring into the open any minority that regularly blocks majority decisions, and would lead to political struggle around this issue, with the possibility that the minority, or majority itself, might be changed. This would be an open and honest voting system, rather than the vague, often manipulative and dishonest, struggle (often without even voting!) for so-called consensus.

If no compromise can be reached that an intensely opposed minority can agree to go along with, then obviously the assembly cannot have a policy on that issue, not without further political struggle to resolve the disagreement. But given the imperatives of cooperative social life, everyone will become acutely aware of the necessity of having collective decisions, if we are to succeed in carrying out any project. It is the rare instance when we can each do our own thing.

Democracy has been a long time coming, and will still be a long time yet in coming. By democracy I mean, not just majority rule, but the use of human intelligence, by everyone, to consciously shape the cultural and social arrangements within which we live. We will never have complete control over our social lives of course, even with the most thoroughly direct democracy possible, because of the phenomenon of unintended consequences. But we can move a long way in that direction.

The idea of democracy existed already in antiquity, and was practiced briefly then. It has reappeared sporadically since then, in medieval towns, in the guilds of the middle ages, in many peasant villages (and undoubtedly elsewhere too, for example in the League of the Iroquois). It was not until modern times however, with the emergence of the belief in popular sovereignty, that democracy started to gain serious ground. Democracy, in the sense of majority rule, has never yet been achieved on the national level anywhere. But the parliaments of the ruling class have been forced to steadily include more and more elements of the population, or at least representatives of those elements, first non propertied white males, then women, then blacks and other ethnic groups, then young adults down to the age of eighteen, and so forth. The ideas of democracy in general, and even of majority rule in particular, have become widely accepted and deeply rooted in contemporary culture. Perhaps someday we will be able to create the reality to match our dreams.

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